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20 years of aiding torture victims

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Minnesota's Center for Victims of Torture marked its 20th anniversary Sunday with calls for the United States to resume world leadership in humane treatment of detainees.

Executive director Douglas Johnson and Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn., said that U.S. interrogators have tortured people captured by the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq. They demanded an executive order to prohibit torture and an independent commission to investigate prisoner treatment.

"The use of torture by our own government is a huge setback for human rights advocates and for the rule of law around the world," Johnson said. The center's anniversary was held on the United Nations International Day in Support of the Victims of Torture.

He said letters to President Bush and to Minnesota's congressional delegation, signed by more than 120 people at the event Sunday, will be the basis for a statewide petition drive demanding an independent investigation of U.S. treatment of prisoners captured in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"There's not a one of us here today that believes in coddling murderers," McCollum said. "But we all stand united in that people need access to justice, they need to be treated fairly, and they needed to be treated humanely."

In a ceremony on the lawn outside the center's headquarters at the University of Minnesota, center founders were honored and a "tree of hope" was planted.

The letter to Bush asks for an executive order "providing clear, detailed guidance to all U.S. personnel on acceptable interrogation procedure," using the 1992 U.S. Army Field Manual on interrogations as its standard. The manual "clearly states that physical and psychological torture are ineffective and may not be used," the letter says. and it asks Bush not to send prisoners to countries that use torture.

The center, the first in the United States, has grown to have 55 full-time staff members in Minnesota and more than 200 elsewhere, primarily in west Africa. In two decades, it has treated about 1,000 clients in Minneapolis and 6,000 in west Africa.

A current client, Bayongson Nde, described being arrested and tortured for participating in efforts to create an independent Ambazonia in the English-speaking area of Cameroon.

A civil servant, Nde was arrested repeatedly between 1993 and 2004. "The idea of torturing us is that we should not continue to advocate for our sovereignty," he said. "As long as you are in detention, it's a daily routine, just like a greeting. You are beaten in the morning, evening -- that's just part of the beatings."

Nde, 58, has been in the United States for nine months. He lives in a Twin Cities suburb with a friend while being supported by the center, where he also volunteers. The center has about 300 volunteers who drive clients and help them secure housing, clothing and food.

Rehabilitation is one of the center's four purposes. The others are training health, education and human services professionals to work with torture survivors; research on the effects of torture and treatment methods, and advocating public policies to end torture, said keynote speaker Robert Stein, executive director of the American Bar Association.

Stein was the U of M law school dean when Perpich asked him to co-chair a task force to create the center. He was co-president of its first board. Last August, a bar association resolution condemned "any use of torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment upon persons within the custody or under the physical control of the United States government." Stein pointed out that the resolution calls upon the United States to comply with its Constitution and international conventions against torture to which it is a signatory.

"Our country is trying to rewrite human-rights laws," Johnson said. "Truth does no come from breaking people. Truth comes from treating people humanely."

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